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SUBJECT: SAM RAINSY'S POLITICAL STRATEGY: PUSH HUN SEN,  
THEN BEAT HIM AT THE POLLS

Classified By: Pol/Econ Chief Margaret McKean, Reason 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary. Opposition leader Sam Rainsy says that reconciliation with Hun Sen was the only way to improve his party's position in upcoming national elections and provide hope for the democratic future of Cambodia. Rainsy hopes that his continued ability to move the government towards desired reforms within important national institutions will solidify democracy in Cambodia -- and his detractors (both here and abroad) will recognize the wisdom of his actions. Rainsy said that Hun Sen is a fact of life and his only hope of helping democracy is to work with the PM to make changes that will benefit Cambodians in the long run. The political landscape is shifting, says Rainsy, and it is unclear which parties will be standing for election in 2008; FUNCINPEC may disappear, CPP could split, and there could be other opposition parties that form between now and elections. The Sam Rainsy Party, however, will continue to work on the side of democracy and the Cambodian people and seek to eventually become the ruling party in the future. End Summary.

Sam Rainsy Explains Himself

12. (C) On February 17, opposition leader Sam Rainsy, accompanied by SRP Standing Committee member Mu Sochua, met with the Ambassador, DCM, and Pol/Econ Chief to outline his political thinking that led to the rapprochement with Prime Minister Hun Sen. Rainsy said that he has undertaken a political reconciliation with Hun Sen, and described the process as just beginning and therefore very fragile -- and one that could be reversed. At the moment, the continuation of the process depends on the mood of the PM and not on existing democratic institutions. Hun Sen decides everything in Cambodia, and the government institutions, e.g., the courts, the parliament, are just a "facade," complained Rainsy. If Cambodia is ruled by one man, then in order to get anything done, one must begin by talking to that man, said the opposition leader, who added it had been a difficult choice. He noted that he risked the support of many friends inside and outside Cambodia to put some trust into a dialogue with Hun Sen, but hopes that dialogue will yield positive results for Cambodia.

13. (C) Rainsy credited the international community's interest and support over the past year, as well as the U.S. Embassy's work on his behalf, as critical to arriving at the situation in Cambodia today. In public, Rainsy said that he

uses the Prime Minister's rhetoric of the reconciliation being a Khmer-Khmer solution, but in reality he knows that Hun Sen never would have reached this stage without outside pressure. He acknowledged that he has been criticized by colleagues and friends for having given in, but Rainsy insisted that he made the right choice for the right reasons.

In order to reach a democratic state in Cambodia, much needs to happen but it all comes down to building democratic institutions. That can only happen through a more independent and transparent political process and elections where average citizens are free to exercise their right to vote without intimidation.

¶4. (C) Rainsy explained that Cambodians were afraid to be associated with the Sam Rainsy Party because the CPP had told them that Sam Rainsy is an enemy who cannot be allowed into power without civil war breaking out. This strategy of manipulating poor, uneducated peasants who value stability after the 25 years of genocide and civil war hurt the SRP, he stated. If Rainsy is seen to be working with the government in a constructive way and the PM no longer characterizes Rainsy as an enemy, people will be more willing to vote in accordance with their beliefs. From Hun Sen's perspective, if he can work with the democrats like Rainsy and human rights leader Kem Sokha, it will be politically advantageous for him as well. Rainsy said Hun Sen wants better relations with the West, particularly the United States, and recognizes Rainsy can help him on that front.

¶5. (C) Rainsy allowed that his year in exile showed that he cannot reform Cambodia's political institutions from the outside as his party would only become more marginalized. The PM has agreed to SRP representation in the Constitutional

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Council and the National Election Commission; two crucial institutions for delivering free and fair elections in 2008, he noted. By being part of those institutions, the SRP will be in a stronger position to stand for upcoming elections, claimed Rainsy. Rainsy said that it has been helpful to his political future for the Prime Minister to suggest that the CPP would invite the SRP to join a coalition government with them in 2008. Rainsy said he would also invite the CPP to join him if the SRP wins. In either event, it shows the populace that the parties are not enemies but constructive partners for the betterment of Cambodia's future. If the SRP can also show results to the population, that will also help their chances, he said. Hun Sen has complained to Rainsy about the poor governors, ministers and other public officials within the system and asked that Rainsy help him with necessary reforms. Already, the PM is taking my advice, said Rainsy, referring to the PM's instructions to one of his advisors to resolve a dispute between businessmen in Kampong Thom and provincial authorities. Rainsy appealed to the PM to assist in this matter as an advocate for the businessmen, and the PM agreed. These results help the PM take credit but Rainsy said that people will also see him as the catalyst for change and credit him as well.

Future of the Political Parties  
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¶6. (C) Rainsy described the political landscape in Cambodia as shifting and one that could change dramatically before 2008. FUNCINPEC has been a poor partner to the CPP in government, and Rainsy said that his political reconciliation with Hun Sen has given the PM the opportunity to get rid of FUNCINPEC. Rainsy noted that the Prime Minister is unhappy with members of his own party -- the old guard whose interests lean towards Vietnam and others whom Rainsy characterized as the "mafia" types within the party. Rainsy would not be surprised if Hun Sen split the CPP and created his own party to rid himself of those people. Another factor is the political future of Hun Sen's son, Hun Manet. Rainsy noted that Hun Sen has political ambitions for his son, but it remains to be seen if those are shared by others in the

CPP. Rainsy also does not believe FUNCINPEC will survive; he speculated that FUNCINPEC supporters will move either towards the CPP or the SRP. Any party that depends on handouts from the CPP but has no interest in governing cannot survive, summed up Rainsy; the SRP envisions itself as the governing party someday -- if not 2008 then in the future.

¶17. (C) As far as the creation of other opposition parties, Rainsy acknowledged that human rights leader and director of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR), Kem Sokha, was a factor and potential party leader in his own right. If the Sam Rainsy Party falters, suggested Rainsy, Kem Sokha would see an opportunity and likely form a party to assume the mantle of the political opposition. However, if the SRP is strong, Kem Sokha will not come forward, predicted Rainsy.

Comment

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¶18. (C) Rainsy has a clear strategy for his party's political future and hopes to capitalize on his credibility as a democrat to move the Prime Minister along the path of democratic reform to the SRP's electoral advantage in 2008. He also appears to have been influenced by the yawning leadership void in the life of the political opposition in Cambodia during his year in exile, and Kem Sokha's aspirations to fill that void if Rainsy did not return. It is still too soon to know if Kem Sokha (or others in the political opposition) will remain on the political sidelines or decide to start a new party. While it is possible that FUNCINPEC will wither and splinter as a political party, not so for the CPP, whose members recognize that one of the CPP's biggest advantages is holding together as a unified party. If the SRP does begin to gain more strength in the countryside, the CPP will likely remain more unified, not less so. But Rainsy is correct that the political landscape in Cambodia has shifted dramatically in a short period of time -- and may continue to do so between now and 2008.

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